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Weaving a Narrative of Translation, Activism, and Knowledge

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Declaration

I, **Valentina Victoria Bravo Cabezas**, hereby certify that this dissertation, which is **18,893** words in length, has been written by me, that it is a record of work carried out by me, and that it has not been submitted in any previous application for a higher degree. All sentences or passages quoted in this dissertation from other people's work (with or without trivial changes) have been placed within quotation marks, and specifically acknowledged by reference to author, work and page. I understand that plagiarism – the unacknowledged use of such passages – will be considered grounds for failure in this dissertation and, if serious, in the degree programme as a whole. I also affirm that, with the exception of the specific acknowledgements, these answers are entirely my own work."

Valentina Bravo C.

To the advocates of informed optimism

Abstract

New technologies are enabling new modes of cooperation, content creation and activism. These changes are affecting the way translation is carried out, and enabling its practitioners to collaborate remotely and contribute to humanitarian causes in new ways. In order to explore the opportunities and challenges that emerge from this fast-evolving landscape, this dissertation focuses on Translators without Borders, TWB, as a case study. This NGO offers translation support for humanitarian agencies around the world and relies on the work of volunteers to fulfil its mission. Using the case study as a starting point, the dissertation discusses contemporary translation theory about volunteering and crowdsourcing, TWB's relationship to its volunteers and other NGOs, and the ways in which the organisation implements crowdsourcing and online collaboration to carry out its work. This analysis reveals the fundamental role of narratives in securing volunteer participation, and the ethical issues and conflicts of interest which underlie TWB. The fact that volunteers continue to participate and support this organisation can serve to illustrate their perception regarding these issues. TWB's crowdsourcing practices, which are essential to its work model, are further blurring the line between professional and non-professional translators. However, they are also a way of harnessing the potential of a workforce that is disseminated around the world. TWB's collaboration with other organisations based on volunteer work is a testament to the ubiquity of this model of content creation, and of the emphasis placed on technology—and the lack of monetary value ascribed to the translators themselves. The analysis also reveals the potential of these new work models to tackle problems of epistemic injustice and the problematic vertical relations between providers and recipients of humanitarian aid. The dissertation concludes by highlighting the importance of interdisciplinary approaches in order to make sense of the current technological landscape and the ways in which it affects the development of translation, activism, and digital content creation.

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Introduction

This dissertation explores contemporary volunteer translation practices. It focuses on the specific case of Translators without Borders—henceforth TWB—, a non-profit organization with the mission to support humanitarian causes through the recruitment of volunteer translators from around the world.¹ The case study opens up two avenues of research. The first is that of activist translation, the narratives that support it, and the narratives that it supports, drawing from Mona Baker's concept as shown in her 2006 work *Narrative and Conflict*. The second avenue is that of the transforming landscape of technology and content creation which supports the existence of TWB as an online platform and as a humanitarian project. Specifically, the dissertation tackles the following questions: (1) what are the narratives that serve as the basis of volunteering practices in TWB? (2) What is the relationship between TWB, its volunteers, and other NGOs, and what can this relationship tell us about contemporary trends in altruism and humanitarian aid? (3) How is TWB making use of new technologies and crowdsourcing— the practice of engaging a 'crowd' or group for a common goal—and what does this teach us about knowledge and content building in the digital age? These queries call for an interdisciplinary dialogue that weaves together translation theory, post-colonial theory, altruism studies, online testimonies and epistemology, revealing new trends in volunteer translation, its capacity for social impact, and the tools at its disposal.

Chapter 1 focuses on current theory in translation studies in the field of activism and volunteering. The chapter briefly traces the development of a cultural turn in translation studies, which enabled field to move forward from issues of equivalence to discussions regarding power relations, censorship, cultural and social transformation aided by translation efforts, and contemporary ethical issues that have emerged as a result of new practices and technologies. Accounts about successful instances of activism, such as examples introduced by authors Else Vieira or Lin Kenan, are used to illustrate the power of translation as a tool for social transformation in different historical and social contexts. They help reveal potential motivations on the side of the volunteers. They also reveal different ways in which these stories can be told and integrated in the corpus of translation

¹ About Us, *Translators without Borders* (2017) <<https://translatorswithoutborders.org/about-us/>>.

theory to serve as reference for future studies. Some ethical concerns raised by these practices are introduced through the works of Maeve Olohan, in order to set the stage for later chapters.

A key concept throughout the dissertation, introduced by Mona Baker, is that of narratives. Drawing from social and communication theory, Baker introduces a concept of narratives as the stories that shape our understanding and interactions with the world.² This highlights the importance of the stories which shape cultural practices, and which give coherence to social causes and to our historical understanding of moments of social transformation. Translators, she argues, occupy a privileged position as mediators of these stories because of the nature of their work. Hence, it is essential to critically approach their practices, as well as the causes they contribute to and the narratives they help shape. Through an analysis of power plays in translation, we can discover contradictions in the stories, and be better prepared to critically engage, as translators and scholars, with the work being done in a variety of contexts and technological environments. Baker's understanding of narratives serves as the backbone for this initial theoretical approach and enables a critical assessment of the involvement of volunteers and activists in TWB, and of TWB's identity as a non-governmental organisation. Because it serves as a link between multiple actors, TWB is a rich object of interdisciplinary study. This is particularly relevant in the face of the multiple pleas for interdisciplinary studies in areas of translation practice, volunteering, and the potential of translation to inform and reshape economic and social practices which are present in the reviewed literature.

Once the theoretical framework for translation is set, Chapter 2 discusses Translators without Borders and its practices, field of action, and policies in depth. It looks at the information available on their website regarding the nature of their work, their past and current projects, and their vision and mission statements. The section also looks at the information available in the press, interviews with its members and testimonials offered by volunteers. This shows how the institution has situated itself in the current landscape of humanitarian aid and activism.

² Baker, Mona, 'Translation and Activism: Emerging Patterns of Narrative Community', *The Massachusetts Review*, 47 (2006), pp. 462–84.

Translators without Borders emphasises its commitment to the Global South and operates in specific regions of the world and with specific agendas. This focus begs the question of volunteering framed through post-colonial theory to gain a better understanding of the implications of this work on a broader historical and economic context. The analysis reveals some narrative inconsistencies, especially regarding TWB's partnership with other institutions and its ties with for-profit companies through its governing body. Having highlighted the importance of narratives as the basis of operation of institutions with humanitarian concerns, and the importance of these narratives as they help institutions recruit volunteers, the chapter provides a historical framework of the birth and evolution of NGOs around the world. An analysis of TWB's vetting practices for allied NGOs is presented to illustrate the role of the organisation as an enabler of the efforts of other institutions, and the ways these partnerships may continue to enforce the idea of the Global south as a section of the world 'in need of aid'.

To complement the analysis, the vetting process for volunteers is also presented and discussed, along with the results of surveys conducted by TWB and the Rosetta Foundation—a similar organisation that merged with TWB in 2017. This helps clarify the motivations and perceptions of volunteers regarding their volunteer work. A reflection from the field of evolutionary biology concerning the nature of altruism is introduced in order to deepen the discussion about volunteering and altruism in broader contexts. The chapter also analyses the accounts of volunteers, presented in the platform in the form of blog-posts and testimonials. This enables us to better understand the perceived role of the volunteers in relation to the narratives presented by TWB, rounding up the discussion.

Chapter 3 focuses on TWB's use of technology and crowdsourcing technologies in order to carry out its work. This is done through an analysis of its online workspace, the Kató platform, and the process through which the translations are carried out. The chapter then explores the concept of crowdsourcing and the ways in which the practice has evolved during the past decade. This is followed by a discussion of the blurring boundaries between professional and non-professional translators, and the implications for translation as a professional field. The chapter then turns to the economic value awarded to translation vs. the economic value awarded to technology, and then to the difficulties of establishing ethical guidelines and quality standards in digital spaces.

TWB's mission statement demonstrates a focus on the dissemination of information that is vital for humanitarian crisis response. Both their short-term and long-term projects act on this goal and attempt to disseminate necessary information in a variety of languages, emphasizing the importance of providing 'culturally appropriate, accessible and open-source'³ information. In this section, the dissertation discusses the importance of diversity of knowledge and translation as a key player in this diversity through an analysis of epistemic injustice in digital environments.⁴ This concept is introduced in order to critically evaluate the nature of this knowledge and discuss the power relationships that result from the volunteer's exercise. The chapter concludes by discussing the potential of online environments to tackle the issue of downward accountability in humanitarian aid and asking whether or not TWB's current model can serve to further this agenda.

Finally, the conclusion presents a summary of the findings of this research and presents recommendations to humanitarian projects making use of volunteers and crowdsourced models.

³ About Us, *Translators without Borders*.

⁴ Gloria Origgi and Serena Ciranna, 'Epistemic Injustice, the case of digital environments', in *The Routledge Handbook of Epistemic Injustice*, ed. by Ian James Kidd, José Medina, and Gaile Pohlhaus, Jr. (London: Routledge, 2017), p. 303-312

Chapter 1: Narratives of activist translation

This chapter focuses on the current theoretical landscape in translation studies regarding activism and volunteering. It briefly traces the development of a cultural turn in translation studies, which enabled the field to evolve beyond issues of linguistic equivalence, and touch on subjects regarding power relations, censorship, and cultural and social transformation aided by translation efforts. The work of Lin Kenan and Elsa Vieira are introduced as examples of the scholarly work that resulted from this turn. Kenan presents a re-reading of translation in key moments in China's history as evidence of translation's power to catalyse social transformation, while Vieira presents the case of a translation project in Brazil that contributed to the social movements that helped bring an end to a two-decade long dictatorship in the country. These examples illustrate both the power of translation as a tool for social transformation and the importance of a narrative that provides coherence to the work of activists who contribute to a cause by providing the knowledge necessary to promote it. Mona Baker's concept of narratives is introduced to explain the importance of the stories that shape a social cause, and the impact they can have on the effectiveness of a translation project. Finally, some of the key concerns in contemporary translation studies are discussed, regarding the use of new technologies and the new forms of collaborative translation and knowledge building, in order to pave the way to the analysis of Translators without Borders.

The cultural turn in translation studies

During the 1990s, translation studies evolved 'from endless debates about "equivalence" to discussion of the factors involved in text production across linguistic boundaries.'⁵ This cultural turn in translation was part of a broader shift towards studies of culture in other disciplines, allowing scholars to analyse texts as they move into new contexts, and introducing issues of gender, postcolonial criticism, language and identity, ethics, ideology and power relationships at play in translation.⁶ This led to 'the systematic study of the

⁵ Susan Bassnett, 'The Translation Turn in Cultural Studies,' in *Constructing Cultures: Essays in Literary Translation*, ed. By Susan Bassnett and André Lefevere (Clevedon: Multilingual Matters, 1998), 133.

⁶ Jeremy Munday, *Introducing Translation Studies: Theories and Applications*, 4th edn (London: Routledge, 2016), 199.

history of translation and translating, the recovery of the statements by translators and translation theory of previous times. This kind of work paralleled similar research in women's studies, particularly of the "hidden from history" variety.⁷ Interdisciplinarity slowly became the norm as these efforts strayed away from dominant English paradigms, further blurring the boundaries of what could be explored through cultural studies and of what could be thought of as a subject matter for translation studies, bringing in discussions from a variety of places, languages, and modes of thought from different corners of the world. This turn contributed to the establishment of translation studies as an accepted academic discipline, spawning a variety of studies and opening fertile new grounds for scholars to explore.

The impetus of the new theoretical approach led to a re-evaluation of past translation endeavours, and a different understanding of contemporary practices. Analysing Translators without Borders on this basis allows us to reflect on the role it plays as an institution for social aid, and of the translators as volunteers and activists whose humanitarian efforts are coordinated and prioritized by the platform. The following section provides three examples which illustrate how the cultural turn in translation studies exercised its newfound abilities to reveal power dynamics surrounding knowledge diffusion, leading to discussions about cooperation, political activism, and altruism.

Translation and social change

The reframing of translation studies opened up the possibility of reinterpreting past projects to highlight their underlying political and social motivations. This led to the discovery—or a retelling, at least—of ways in which translation catalysed social and political change at key historical moments. An analysis of relevant examples points to the importance of the narratives which provide coherence to these projects, offering clues about the issues and challenges of such initiatives. These examples are but a selection among many texts dealing with issues of cultural significance beyond the practice of translation itself, and are useful to demonstrate the storytelling aspect of translation studies with a focus on cultural dynamics.

⁷ Bassnett, 128.

One such example comes from theorist Lin Kenan in his text ‘Translation as a Catalyst for Social Change in China,’ where he suggests a revision of the history of translation in China as it had, in the past, focused entirely on factual information about versions, translators, and texts.⁸ Kenan observed the social and political contexts that framed the introduction of knowledge originated in different cultural and linguistic contexts, and which served as catalysts for social change in his country. He presents the influx of texts in relation to existing gaps in the receiving culture, an exercise that can help us to better understand the ability of translation to come into play at moments of social transformation, revealing the ways in which it can help create new paradigms, satisfy, ignore or even suppress the incorporation of new knowledge and hence new forms of thought:

Broadly one can see translation as a response to the needs and demands of society in the Chinese record: Buddhist translation can be seen as satisfying spiritual needs; the technological translation of the seventeenth century and recent years has propelled material advancement; and translation of the social sciences and humanities has helped ideological evolution and revolution at periods when China has been in great social transition.⁹

Kenan’s work also raises questions regarding the way in which we historicize social change, and the way in which translators and translation can become part (or not) of these stories. Translators, then, can play a very active role regarding the needs of their cultural context, and have a capacity to respond to current political issues: ‘the demands and needs for translation arose when existing conditions were inadequate or even absent to accomplish a certain purpose.’¹⁰ Kenan illustrates the way in which new information can shift the religion, politics, and economy of a culture at key moments, to serve the agendas of those who are in control of what is translated and how. This will prove relevant when discussing TWB’s relation to other NGOs. Kenan also demonstrates the role of translation as a tool for violence or social control. Such was the case of the censorship of texts with contents that challenged the tenets of the Chinese Communist Revolution from the 1950s onward. The role of translation as it serves an agenda of social transformation, then,

⁸ Lin Kenan, ‘Translation as a Catalyst for Social Change in China’, in *Translation and Power*, edited by Maria Tymoczko and Edwin Gentzler (Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2002), pp. 160–83.

⁹ Ibid, 172.

¹⁰ Ibid.

demands a critical review of the agents making the choices, their motivations, and an awareness of what is being left out in the proposed knowledge exchanges.

Research conducted by Maeve Olohan in her article ‘Volunteer Translation and Altruism in the Context of a Nineteenth-Century Scientific Journal’¹¹ is also a fruitful example of the new avenues explored by contemporary translation theorists. In her text, Olohan evaluates power relations visible in the context of a collaborative translation effort conducted in the 19th century. To accomplish this, she relies on letters and other documents which survived the publication of the *Scientific Memoirs* journal, which had 5 volumes, and was part of a British shift in which science ceased to be simply an elite intellectual activity and began to occupy a place in the professional sphere, including the participation of researchers who held positions in universities and research institutions.¹²

In addition to framing the social context of the journal’s publication, Olohan draws on the work of economist Joseph Stiglitz in order to clarify the place that the journal occupied as a private good that was published for ‘the public good.’ As Stiglitz argues, ‘knowledge is a public good by nature, regardless of the (sometimes significant) costs associated with its transmission.’¹³ This notion of public good seems to have been a fundamental part of the rhetoric that enabled the journal to survive through five editions, as the unpaid contributors could see themselves as supporters of ‘scientific progress, particularly in Britain.’¹⁴ The perceived contribution to public knowledge played an important role in maintaining the volunteers engaged. The fact that the journal’s editor was—very publicly—not looking to make a profit was a vital part of the survival of the journal, presenting a hierarchy of value in which a long-lasting contribution to society at large was a goal that, at least temporarily, served to overcome the practical complications of maintaining the journal afloat. This dynamic is similar to that implemented by TWB, where volunteer participation is what enables the organization to accomplish its purpose. The volunteers are presented with the opportunity to collaborate, but no concrete material goal is offered to them in turn. While shedding light on the reasons why volunteers might decide to

¹¹ Maeve Olohan, ‘Volunteer Translation and Altruism in the Context of a Nineteenth-Century Scientific Journal,’ *The Translator*, 18:2 (2012), pp. 193-215

¹² *Ibid*, 198.

¹³ *Ibid*, 197-98.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 204.

contribute to a particular project or refuse another, the example of this journal also invites a critical assessment about the notion of ‘public good’ that serves as the basis of a project’s narrative, a question which we will return to in the Chapter 2 when looking more specifically at the notion of ‘humanitarian aid’.

While Olohan’s account is built around the notion of altruism as a driving force, a different account, this time by Else Vieira, serves as an exploration of translation put to the service of activism.¹⁵ Her text tells the story of her involvement as the leader of a team commissioned to translate a thesis written by a Ph.D. student from the University of Glasgow on the political history of Brazil. The translation was commissioned by Vozes, one of the five largest publishers in the country that was known to publish books that were ‘frowned upon by the dictatorship.’¹⁶ The result was published in 1981, in the midst of a social and political transformation that would eventually lead to the dissolution of a two-decade dictatorship in 1985.

Vieira’s deeply personal account reinforces the agency of translators as they contributed to a transformation enabled, or at least aided, by knowledge which came from research conducted abroad and in a different language, outside of the control of the dictatorial regime. The historical research in the thesis contributed to catalysing a political shift that echoes the stories told by Kenan. The involvement of a collective of four translators also reinforces the notion of translation and its potential as a collaborative activity. This is fundamental to the efforts of TWB, which relies not only on the contributions of individual translators who decide to volunteer their services, but also on the sense of community that enables volunteers to engage with a single, unified cause. What Vieira accomplishes beyond that, however, is a narrative exercise which does two things: first, it emphasizes the way in which a cause can reunite participants and get them involved in a narrative of political activism where they are actively contributing to shaping the future of their society; second, as a literary and critical exercise, Vieira’s testimony highlights the power of storytelling to create a space in academia in which personal accounts can be part of the efforts to push both theory and practice forward. Vieira

¹⁵ Else R. P. Vieira, ‘Growing Agency: The Labors of Political Translation’, in *Translation, Resistance, Activism*, ed. by Maria Tymoczko (Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2010), pp. 211–26.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 213.

intertwines the narrative of the translation with that of her own impending motherhood—she was pregnant while working on the project. In the end, she helped give birth to a political piece of great importance as well as to her own child, and birthed, through her account, a testimonial of the power of collaboration, of social transformation, and of the agency of a group of individuals to shape the history of their country.

The power of narratives

The accounts mentioned above illuminate translation's capacity to generate social change, channelling the altruistic spirit of willing collaborators. They also prompt us to reflect on the importance of narratives to push forward political or cultural agendas, or to recover past experiences and practices so that they may help shape contemporary initiatives. Following Mona Baker's take on narratives can be a useful way to further explore the ways in which translators 'engage with the narrative world in which they are embedded in a variety of ways.'¹⁷

Moving beyond concepts of narrative based on their linguistic structure, and drawing from concepts from social and communication theory, Baker proposes a definition of narrative as 'the stories we tell ourselves, not just those we explicitly tell other people, about the world(s) in which we live.'¹⁸ This notion of narrative recognizes that 'people's behaviour is ultimately guided by the stories they come to believe about the events in which they are embedded, rather than by their gender, race, colour of skin or any other attribute,' that 'because narratives are dynamic, they cannot be streamlined into a set of stable stories that people simply choose from,' and that the fact they are continually open to change provides them with 'significant subversive or transformative potential.'¹⁹ On this basis, Baker discusses the legitimizing and normalizing capabilities of narratives, and the real-life political and ethical implications of seemingly objective narratives that can be used to justify violence or social injustice, such as the seemingly objective scientific narratives used in the 19th century to justify racial violence in the UK.²⁰

¹⁷ Baker, 26

¹⁸ Mona Baker, *Translation and Conflict: A Narrative Account* (London: Routledge, 2006), 3.

¹⁹ Ewick and Silbey 1995: 1999, in Mona Baker, *Translation and Conflict*, 3.

²⁰ Ibid, 12.

Baker insists on the importance of translators as mediators and propagators of said narratives: 'As language mediators, translators and interpreters are uniquely placed to initiate this type of discursive intervention at a global level.'²¹ This has to do with their ability to navigate between different linguistic and cultural contexts, bridging gaps between individuals, cultures, and historical moments. She argues for translators to take responsibility for the narratives they elaborate and promote through their translation work.'²²

Through her analysis, Baker contributes a model through which we can critically assess the coherence of these narratives insofar as they represent value hierarchies that can be contrasted with the practices of the institutions. Baker recognizes that associations of translators and professionals are rallying to provide support to the communities that, in turn, emerge as forms of resistance 'that arguably respond to the most urgent needs of our time.'²³ Such is the case of institutions like Traduttori per la Pace, ECOS, or Babels, all of which are communities with a shared ethos of knowledge diffusion. Members of these communities, Baker argues, recognize that 'the concrete experience of our lives cannot be changed without simultaneously changing the narratives that underpin them.'²⁴ This emphasis on narratives is fundamental because it lies at the core of the volunteer-organization-public relationship. Just as the translator mediates between languages and is able to fill knowledge gaps in the receiving language, these narratives mediate between the community of translators and their altruistic goals. In the case of TWB, there are specific narratives that mediate between the volunteers and the organization and imbue the work with meaning beyond the mere word count that the volunteers produce. It is a narrative that seeks to foster awareness of the importance of accessible information in zones affected by disease or natural disasters, but also one that presupposes the need for aid in certain areas of the world and that guarantees specific forms of intervention. It is also a set of narratives that mediates between the organization itself, and the NGOs that seek its support, as discussed in the following chapter.

²¹ Baker 2006, 467.

²² Baker, *Translation and Conflict*, 26.

²³ Ibid, 31.

²⁴ Ibid.

Exploring issues of coherence and ethics involved in narratives of volunteering and activism is, as illustrated by Baker's efforts, a necessary task if one is to untangle the increasingly complex web of worldviews, conflicting agendas, and causes that come into play in volunteer translation. The examples explored above reveal that undermining existing patterns of domination requires not only concrete forms of activism (such as demonstrations, sit-ins, and civil disobedience) but must involve a direct challenge to the stories that sustain these patterns. Translators, because of their set of skills, are indeed situated in an ideal place of transit and transformation of the narratives that shape their contexts. But, is that privileged place, and its resulting capacity for action, sacrificed when translators choose to collaborate freely and without acknowledgement? This question also relates to how TWB, as a mediator between the volunteers and the NGOs, may have a negative impact on translation as a professional activity. The emergence of new models of content creation and of crowdsourcing initiatives, where anonymity is common practice, further complicates the issue of the translator's free participation, and will be more deeply discussed when tackling the analysis of translation practices in the following chapters. At this stage, however, it is worth reflecting on the economic and legal standing of translators as a way to further problematize the notion of the translator as activist.

It is again Maeve Olohan's research which can help illustrate the economic implications of volunteer translation initiatives, especially through her article 'Economic Trends and Developments in the Translation Industry.'²⁵ Her research on the place translation takes as an economic activity serves to illuminate its standing in the contemporary globalized context. What is curious is that translation and interpreting are not acknowledged financially—there is no specific room for these activities in institutions such as the Internal Revenue Service in the USA or in the UK.²⁶ Olohan interprets this fact as an institutional refusal to acknowledge them as a legitimate way to earn a living and make a financial—or otherwise—contribution to society. There is an apparent contradiction, then, between the way in which translation is taken as an economic activity, and its value as a potential catalyst for social change, as seen in the examples set by Kenan and Vieira, or as illustrated by the variety of charities and NGOs cited by Mona Baker. This

²⁵ Maeve Olohan, 'Economic Trends and Developments in the Translation Industry', *The Interpreter and Translator Trainer*, 1 (2007), 37–63

²⁶ *Ibid*, 40.

contradiction is fundamental when analysing the relations between TWB and its volunteers, and will prove relevant when discussing the economic value awarded to technology as presented in Chapter 3.

New technologies, new challenges

Online collaborative efforts have become impossible to ignore—the phenomenon is everywhere. It is pertinent then, to turn an eye to the dynamics of crowdsourced translation in the current digital landscape. New technologies have helped bridge communities across the world in new ways. The advent of the digital age has meant the development of new ways of translation, from Computer-Assisted Translation or CAT Tools, to Google Translate, to the creation of worldwide forums such as WordReference, a popular translation dictionary with a forum where users discuss terms and phrases, and ProZ, a membership-based site where freelance translators can engage with potential employers, and which currently maintains TWB's online workspace.²⁷ This effectively opened up new spaces where translators—or any willing contributor—could bring their concerns to the digital table and exchange opinions, knowledge about specific terms or cultural contexts, or even respond to job offers.

As new ways of translating develop and become available to users worldwide, so do new forms of collecting, storing, and divulging knowledge through collaborative platforms. Wikipedia, founded in 2001, has grown to become the flagship for the new era of digital content creation through collaboration, a project that strives to 'create and distribute a free encyclopedia of the highest possible quality to every single person on the planet in their own language.'²⁸ Crowdsourcing has become a key term, signifying collaborative efforts where both professionals and non-professionals contribute to the growth and quality control of online projects.

The appearance of these new forms of collaborative knowledge also influence the ways in which narratives are constructed and disseminated. As TWB continues to expand, the number of online testimonies, blog posts, and digital news articles contribute to

²⁷ Translators without Borders Workspace, <<https://twb.translationcenter.org/workspace/about>> [Accessed June 18, 2018].

²⁸ 'Wikipedia is an encyclopedia'. Wikimedia. March 8, 2005 <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Wikipedia_is_an_encyclopedia> [Accessed March 5, 2017].

building the institution's identity online. With lessons learned through the works of Baker and other translation theorists, the need to question how these narratives take shape and are used to recruit contributors becomes evident. The following chapter discusses the narratives underlying TWB, and the way the institution engages with volunteers and other institutions, pointing to conflicts of interest and ethical concerns that stem from the organisation's work and continued growth.

Chapter 2: NGOs and volunteers linked to Translators without Borders

As demonstrated in the previous chapter, translation can be implemented as a tool for social and political transformation, and the narratives supporting these efforts play a key role in engaging translators and other participants in these social initiatives. To explore this premise further, this chapter begins by outlining the history, structural organization, and narratives used by Translators without Borders to engage with the public, with volunteer translators, and with other institutions. The criticism of TWB's ties to for-profit companies published in 2006 by Mona Baker is introduced and updated to reflect the evolution of the institution in the past decade. This leads to a discussion of its position in a broader landscape of not-for-profit organizations devoted to humanitarian aid with a focus on the Global South, by presenting a brief account of the birth of Non-Governmental-Organizations in Africa in the 20th century. TWB's practices and vetting procedures to select partner institutions are also analysed, providing a view of the ethical concerns raised by the institution's work. The chapter turns to the reasons why, despite these ethical concerns, volunteers continue to make the choice of collaborating with TWB. It presents available data regarding the profiles and motivations of volunteers, contrasting them with an analysis of the motivations of volunteer translators in other projects, and briefly discussing altruism from a biological perspective. This serves to illustrate the effectiveness and relevance of the narrative of social aid that is presented by TWB. The analysis leads us to conclude that the effectiveness of a narrative of social aid, as well as the possibility for action, can be stronger than ethical concerns and narratives of historical injustice, and that the question of whether volunteers are being altruistic or not is secondary to the fact that they actively contribute to improving the conditions of vulnerable communities. Finally, the chapter highlights the importance of analysing the practical accomplishments of an institution, paving the way to a discussion about TWB's use of technology and crowdsourcing initiatives in the following chapter.

Translators without Borders at a glance

Translators without Borders describes itself as a 'non-profit organization offering language and translation support for humanitarian and development agencies, and other non-profit

organizations on a global scale.’²⁹ Based in the U.S., it was incorporated in 2010 as a sister organization to Traducteurs Sans Frontières, founded in France in 1995.³⁰ Their goal of ‘eliminating language barriers’³¹ has led them to partner with hundreds of non-profits and NGOs from around the world,³² including Médecins Sans Frontières, Oxfam, Save the Children, Reporters Without Borders, and Wikipedia.³³ As of June 2018, TWB has donated over sixty million translated words in 190 language pairs, has 7,036 volunteer translators, and has partnered up with 303 humanitarian organisations.³⁴ TWB’s vision is to help create ‘[a] world where knowledge knows no language barriers.’ As stated on their website, the organization’s mission is

‘To provide people [*sic*] access to vital knowledge in their language by:

- Providing aid in humanitarian crisis response through **translation and interpreting**
- Providing **translation and simplification services** that are culturally appropriate, accessible and open-source
- Building language **translation capacity** at the local level
- Raising **awareness** globally of language barriers³⁵

TWB is run by a Board of Directors currently comprised of 8 members. This Board includes: Dr. Andrew Bredenkamp, chairman of the Board and founder and chairman of Acrolinx, a software company that provides communications support; Salvatore Giammarresi, Board Member and head of localization at Airbnb; Val Swisher, Board Member CEO of Content Rules, Inc, a company providing support for content creation; Francis Tsang, Board Member and leader of the international engineering effort at LinkedIn; Donna Parrish, Board Member and owner and publisher of MultiLingual Magazine; Nigel Fisher, Board Member and COO of Allied BioScience Canada, a research and development company working on technologies for coating processes; Iris Orriss, Board Member and Director of

²⁹ Translators Without Borders, *About Us* <<https://translatorswithoutborders.org/about-us>> [accessed 27 November 2017].

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² Translators Without Borders, Annual Report 2017, (April 29, 2015) <<https://translatorswithoutborders.org/translators-without-borders-response-to-the-nepal-earthquake/>> [accessed 08 April 2018].

³³ *About Us.*

³⁴ Translators without Borders Workspace, <<https://twb.translationcenter.org/workspace/about>> [Accessed June 18, 2018]

³⁵ *About Us.*

Internationalization at Facebook; Chris Fyfe, Board Member and International Finance Director for Greenpeace International. Lori Thicke, founder of TWB and founder and CEO of Lexcelera—a French-based translation company—is not an official member, although she is featured prominently on the Board website.³⁶ In addition to the volunteers and Board Members, TWB has a staff of 18 members working on direction, coordination of crisis response, external health, finance and administration, innovation, and technology, and a team of 5 Ambassadors who are active supporters of the organization.

Narrative inconsistencies, ethical concerns

It is important to note the links between the Board Members and the corporations that they are affiliated to, as this raises questions regarding conflicts of interest between the altruistic endeavours of TWB and the profit-oriented corporations that are related to it via its governing body. This was the concern raised by Mona Baker in her 2006 text ‘Translation and Activism: Emerging Patterns of Narrative Community’, specifically when discussing coherence and fidelity in the narratives of activists and volunteer translation organizations. In Baker’s estimation, TWB tests negative in her assessment of internal narrative consistency. The fact that Eurotexte³⁷—now Lexcelera—features TWB on its website collapses the distinction between a commercial company and a not-for-profit organization. For Baker, this association raised serious ethical concerns, especially because Eurotexte was linked, at the time, with companies ‘directly or indirectly implicated in the very atrocities that communities like Translators without Borders are meant to be bringing to our attention’. She continues: ‘At best, Eurotexte/TWB may be accused of taking only a superficial interest in the plight of the groups it presumes to defend and of failing to look into the wider context of the tragedies it purports to oppose. At worst Eurotexte knowingly and cynically exploits both oppressor and oppressed to further its own commercial success.’³⁸

Baker’s criticism came years before TWB established itself as an NGO in the United States, and much has changed since then. For instance, the name Eurotexte, along with its

³⁶ Translators Without Borders, *Board of Directors* < <https://translatorswithoutborders.org/about-us/board/> > [accessed 10 April 2018].

³⁷ Eurotexte Group has either fully converted to Lexcelera or ceased to exist. No information appears online and the website cited by Baker is no longer operational.

³⁸ Baker, 2006, 480.

website and interviews which Baker cited to support her argument, are no longer available. Instead, the company is now branded as Lexcelera, and still features TWB on its main landing page. Their affiliation is described as follows: 'Lexcelera founded the world's largest humanitarian translation charity, active in over 100 languages.'³⁹ The link leads to a description of 'The world's largest translation charity' and an interview with Thicke where she discusses TWB's mission and partnership with ProZ.⁴⁰ It is impossible at the moment to contrast this current placement of TWB on the Lexcelera website with Eurotexte's use of the name and brand at the time. In the twelve years since Baker's criticisms, TWB has continued to expand in terms of the number of volunteers—with 718 new translators added in the last year—,⁴¹ affiliated NGOs, full staff members, and Board Members. This has resulted in even more links with renowned companies around the world, and deepening, if we follow Baker's argument, the ethical concerns that arise from such links. However, it is difficult to assess whether these links have been an impediment to the humanitarian work. Evidently, they have not deterred the volunteers themselves nor the NGOs who seek their services, as both numbers have continued to increase as steadily as the donated word count.

Baker raises an important question regarding narrative inconsistencies which may ultimately undermine the purpose of an NGO. She is sceptical about stories feeding into narratives of social responsibility designed to make the donors feel good about themselves rather than directly addressing the needs of the recipients.⁴² However, these ethical concerns go beyond TWB's specific circumstances and narrative inconsistencies, and have to do with the stories linked to the institutions they collaborate with. Because they are part of a broader landscape of NGOs, discussing the context in which these institutions operate can help posit a more complete criticism.

³⁹ Lexcelera, The world's largest translation charity (2018) <<https://www.lexcelera.com/who-we-are/translators-without-borders/>> [accessed 8 April 2018]

⁴⁰ This alliance, which is centred around technology, is further analysed in the following chapter.

⁴¹ Translators Without Borders, Annual Report 2017.

⁴² Baker, 2006, 480.

The broader landscape of NGOs

TWB serves as a liaison between partner NGOs which require translation services, and a group of volunteer translators, often full-time professionals,⁴³ who provide their services freely. TWB subjects both parties to vetting processes to ensure they comply with their mission and quality standards. Their mission and vision statements point to an agenda of knowledge diffusion, emphasizing its importance in crisis situations in the Global South.⁴⁴

TWB segments their efforts into four categories: (1) Words of Relief, their crisis response mechanism implemented for relief efforts for catastrophes such as the Nepal earthquake of 2015, the Ecuador earthquake in 2016, the 2016 Zika outbreak in Haiti, or the ongoing European refugee crisis; (2) Development and Preparedness, providing support for non-crisis aid programs worldwide, including projects such as Simple Words for Health, seeking to simplify medical information, or Project Wiki 100x100, with the goal of translating Wikipedia's 100 highest ranked medical articles into an equal number of languages from developing countries; (3) Capacity Building, projects currently based in Kenya and Guinea with the aim of providing training to translators and interpreters on the field; (4) Advocacy, efforts to increase awareness of the importance of translation in crisis response and humanitarian relief. Both through their narratives, which emphasize aid to the Global South, and by mapping out their activities in the past decade, it becomes clear that TWB's long term efforts are concentrated in Africa, focusing on populations that are vulnerable not only in crisis situations, but that suffer long-term vulnerability in historical, economic and social terms. To put it succinctly, TWB is one of many NGOs with a mission to aid the vulnerable peoples of the Global South. This presupposes two things: 1) the Global South is in need of aid, and 2) NGOs in developed nations are in a position to provide this aid. In order to unpack the significance of these two statements, a few words regarding NGOs are necessary.

⁴³ Translators Without Borders, Volunteer <<https://translatorswithoutborders.org/volunteer/>> [accessed 20 April 2018].

⁴⁴ The mechanisms through which this agenda is put into practice are discussed in the following chapter, including use of technology, implementation of educational projects, and long-term efforts beyond emergency aid.

In their article 'NGOs and development in Africa,'⁴⁵ Firoze Manji and Carl O'Coill present a stark criticism of development agendas pushed forward in Africa by NGOs which, they argue, serve as mere replacements for pre-existing colonial institutions. These institutions, in turn, had served to implement political and economic agendas designed for the exploitation of resources in the continent, a practice that continued until the second half of the 20th century. As the post-colonial representatives of First World interests, NGOs in Africa push forward agendas of altruism, aid and development that, as David Sooge suggests, are 'shibboleths, catch phrases that distinguish believers from doubters. Indeed they are utterances of belief. At best they are half-truths.'⁴⁶ NGOs, the authors claim, serve only to perpetuate vertical power relations between them and the subjects of their aid, essentially continuing colonial practices under the table, as their work 'contributes marginally to the relief of poverty, but significantly to undermining the struggle of African people to emancipate themselves from economic, social and political oppression.'⁴⁷ Manji and O'Coill compare the emergent discourses of 'development aid' to ideological and marketing strategies implemented to push forward neoliberal agendas in the region: 'The purpose of "development" is, therefore, to guarantee "growth" so that ultimately other freedoms can be enjoyed at some indeterminate time in the future.'⁴⁸ This emphasis on growth at the core of neoliberal practices has, paradoxically, resulted in greater inequality in Africa and Latin America: 'Externally imposed constraints on health, education and welfare measures and social programmes, tax concessions on profits, liberalization of price controls, and dismantling of state-owned enterprise—all have contributed to widening internal disparities.'⁴⁹

A similar criticism is raised by Gilbert Rist in his text 'The Triumph of Third-Worldism', where he speaks of the widening economic gaps in Third World countries as a result of a mentality and political agendas pushed in the 70s by institutions such as the UN, which perceived the notion of 'development' as equal to 'aid from the North to the South',

⁴⁵ Firoze Manji and Carl O'Coill, 'The Missionary Position: NGOs and Development in Africa', *International Affairs*, 78.3, (2002), 567-583, in <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/3095891>> [accessed 28 November 2017].

⁴⁶ David Sooge, *Give and take: what's the matter with foreign aid*, (London: Zed Books, 2002).

⁴⁷ Manji and O'Coill, 576.

⁴⁸ Ibid, 577.

⁴⁹ Ibid, 578.

an aid based on the premise that countries in the South needed to ‘catch up’ to how things were done in the North.⁵⁰

These discussions are useful in two fronts. First, they emphasize the importance of the narrative shift towards ‘development’ and ‘aid’ that enabled the evolution of political and economic institutions into NGOs, maintaining relationships of dependence with developed nations and hindering true development in Africa. Their work also echoes Baker’s concerns regarding ‘feel-good’ narratives that are appealing to volunteers, but ultimately ineffective in tackling the true issues that plague developing countries. Second, they provide tools for debating core notions of ‘altruism’ and ‘aid’ that are central to TWB’s efforts.

This historical context raises an ethical red flag. Following Baker’s argumentation, by enabling institutions like the ones mentioned above, which are historically linked to practices of post-colonial control in Africa, TWB at best perpetuates the idea that developing regions in the world require external aid in order to overcome their inadequacies, under the assumption that only this aid will ever enable the growth that a neoliberal economic system has set as the measurement for success. At worst, they may be hindering true development through their work, essentially recruiting volunteers to undermine any hope for these countries to evolve beyond their role as subjects of aid by emphasizing their inability to participate in a global landscape of knowledge.

However, TWB is emphatic in its communications, as well as in many of the projects it is currently pushing forward, about the idea of knowledge as a means to empower the communities. This is especially true of their Development and Preparedness and Capacity Building projects, which are controlled and implemented directly by them and have long-term goals—and which are discussed in depth in the following chapter. In addition to this narrative of empowerment, TWB does demonstrate at least a theoretical concern about the practices of partner institutions. This is evident in their vetting practices, which enable them to assess the eligibility of an NGO that requests their services.

⁵⁰ Gilbert Rist, ‘Triumph of Third-Worldism’, in *The History of Development*, 3rd edn. (New Delhi: Academic Foundation, 2009), p. 147

In order to benefit from TWB's services, NGOs are required to demonstrate their status as non-governmental, non-profit institutions with a proven track record of engagement in activities that support vulnerable communities, social and community welfare, advancement of culture, environment, or akin purposes. As of January 2017, partner institutions are also asked to pay an annual management fee (the fee from 2018 onward begins at US \$850), which is used to cover maintenance of the Kató platform, TWB's online workspace.⁵¹ The fact that money is being now exchanged between TWB and its partner institutions raises further concerns regarding the devaluation of the professional work they rely on via their volunteer body. This is further problematized in the following chapter, which goes into greater depths regarding the issues of professionalization of volunteer translators.

The conflicting landscape of NGOs in Africa, and the potential conflicts of interest that may arise from TWB's practice as an institution dedicated to partnering up NGOs with translators, raises a few final questions. Does the risk of narrative or ethical contradictions devalue the work of TWB or render it unviable? Or that of any NGO wishing to act in developing countries? There are clearly ethical contradictions in the work. However, it is impossible to imagine any organization being able to tackle, effectively or not, any of the issues that plague humanity in a way that is perfect and free of conflicts of interest. TWB, because of the nature of its work, is in an especially precarious position as it is an enabler of the works of other institutions. While it shows an awareness of this through its vetting practices, it is impossible to argue that they are free from conflict, either on that front or on that of their own independently run projects. Besides providing a historic awareness of the circumstances that gave rise to NGOs, the criticisms of Mani and O'Coill teach us that it is essential to push beyond notions of 'aid' and to separate the idea of 'development' from the idea of 'catching up' with the developed world. The outcomes of this mentality have demonstrated catastrophic consequences to economies in developed countries. TWB can be seen to counteract this by pushing projects that go beyond emergency aid or

⁵¹ Translators Without Borders, *TWB Kató Upgrade and Management Fee FAQ*, (2018) <<https://translatorswithoutborders.org/non-profits/translation-services/twb-workspace-upgrade-management-fee-faq/>> [accessed 10 April 2018].

supporting the work of other institutions, although it is equally at fault for perpetuating a narrative of 'aid to the Global South' that can ultimately prove harmful.

However, the fact is that TWB's community of collaborators, as well as the translated word count, have continued to rise over the years. This suggests that the volunteers are effectively voting in favour of TWB, a vote cast through action. Perhaps a definitive ethical assessment of their work regarding their links with for-profit institutions should come second to the practical decision that both NGOs and volunteer translators have continued to make in favour of TWB's agenda. This growth begs the question: should their involvement with for-profit organizations invalidate their humanitarian work? What about the volunteers themselves? Can they be thought of as simply partaking in a feel-good narrative without any ethical consideration or critical evaluation of their own involvement? This leads us to an analysis of the volunteers, of how they become part of TWB, and what they have to say about their work.

Who are the Translators without Borders?

Just as NGOs wishing to take advantage of TWB's services, any translator wishing to become a volunteer must go through a vetting process. This includes filling an application form indicating basic information, native language, source and target language(s), willingness to undergo a qualification test, years of translation experience, and formal qualifications.⁵² Quality and professionalism on the side of the volunteers is highlighted in this application, and translation projects in specialized fields are only available to volunteers with pertinent qualifications and experience. In line with this concern for professionalism, there is a 'fast track' option in the application for certified PRO members of ProZ.com, certified members of the American Translation Association (ATA), Members of the MITI Institute of Translation and Interpreting, Associação Brasileira de Tradutores ABRATES, the Society of Translators and Interpreters of British Columbia STIBC, Lionbridge, Lexcelera and Medilingua.⁵³

⁵² Translators Application Form (2018) <<https://translatorswithoutborders.org/volunteer/translators/>> [accessed 28 April 2018].

⁵³ 'Translators without Borders and The Rosetta Foundation are merging' (2018) <<https://www.therosettafoundation.org/blog/translators-without-borders-and-the-rosetta-foundation-are-merging/>> [accessed 27 May 2018]; '30 million words and counting', newsletter March 2016 <<http://translatorswithoutborders.org/twbnewsletter/10/30-million-words-and-counting/>>

Unlike other institutions relying on volunteers for content translation, such as Coursera or TED which offer the opportunity to network or appeal to translator's interest in acquiring professional experience at initial stages of their careers, TWB offers no such reward. It seems unlikely that kickstarting a career in translation would be a primary motivation, as the vetting process actually requires volunteers to have formal training or demonstrated experience in translation in the first place.

Volunteer motivation and feedback

In the spring of 2013, TWB deployed a survey to all volunteers.⁵⁴ Based on 440 responses, the survey indicated that the majority of repliers (67.5%) found out about TWB through their affiliation with ProZ. A total of 38.5% were fast-tracked because they were ProZ certified PRO members, with 43.8% of respondents being accepted after their translation sample was vetted and approved, showing that at this time the link with ProZ was significant to TWB both in terms of promoting their activities and recruiting volunteers. The issue of motivation to translate was addressed in question five in the survey:

Question 5: What is the main factor that motivates you to accept a TWB assignment?

The top reason reported was availability (58.9%) [time available for extra work]. Next came the organization asking for help (13.0%) and the impact of the project (13.9%).

The subject of the translation came next with 10.9% of votes.

Finally came a generous deadline (0.5%), the format of the files (0.2%) and a combination of the above factors (2.6%).⁵⁵

When prompted to indicate whether they receive appropriate recognition for the work they do for humanitarian organizations through TWB, the volunteers indicated the following: 'Yes, very much (50.9%), Yes, somewhat appreciated (41.9%); Not properly appreciated (7.2%).'⁵⁶ This suggests there is a perceived sense of recognition and acknowledgement of the value of their work.

⁵⁴ The Translators without Borders Translator Survey (2013)
<<http://translatorswithoutborders.org/twbnewsletter/04/the-translators-without-borders-translator-survey/>> [accessed 27 May 2018].

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

In May 2017, the results of another survey were released through the TWB Newsletter. While this time they only made the summarized results available, there are some noteworthy differences, especially in terms of volunteer motivation.⁵⁷ The survey indicated: 'An overwhelming majority (97%) of translators said they volunteer because they like helping others and contributing to a good cause.' In terms of motivations beyond humanitarian aid, the survey results indicated that 'While career development, increased professional visibility, and interesting projects were also mentioned as some of the benefits of volunteering with TWB, our volunteer community is primarily driven by the desire to help people in need and work for humanitarian causes.'⁵⁸ As the specific questions asked in the 2017 survey are not available online, it is hard to pinpoint the origin of these differences. What is noticeable is that the emphasis on altruism as a motivation grows consistently as the organization continued to expand.

The results of a survey conducted by the Rosetta Foundation,⁵⁹ a non-profit Irish organisation which promotes access to information and knowledge across the languages of the world, and which merged with TWB in 2017, shows that their volunteers have similar motivations. Out of 700 respondents, 80% identify as professional or full-time translators. Professional growth did play a significant role in this survey. Over 60% of respondents said that gaining professional experience and skills is one reason why they volunteer. An overwhelming majority of Rosetta volunteers (nearly 90%), however, are primarily motivated by helping others and contributing to a good cause. This trait makes the Rosetta volunteer community very similar to that of Translators without Borders (TWB), which ranked the desire to do good well above other motivations, such as working in the humanitarian field, developing skills, or gaining professional visibility.

⁵⁷ The TWB translator community survey results are out! (May 2017) <<https://www.translatorswithoutborders.org/blog/translator-community-survey-results/>> [accessed 27 May 2018].

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ The Rosetta volunteer community survey results are out! <<https://www.therosettafoundation.org/blog/rosetta-community-survey/>> [accessed 27 May 2018].

Volunteer motivations

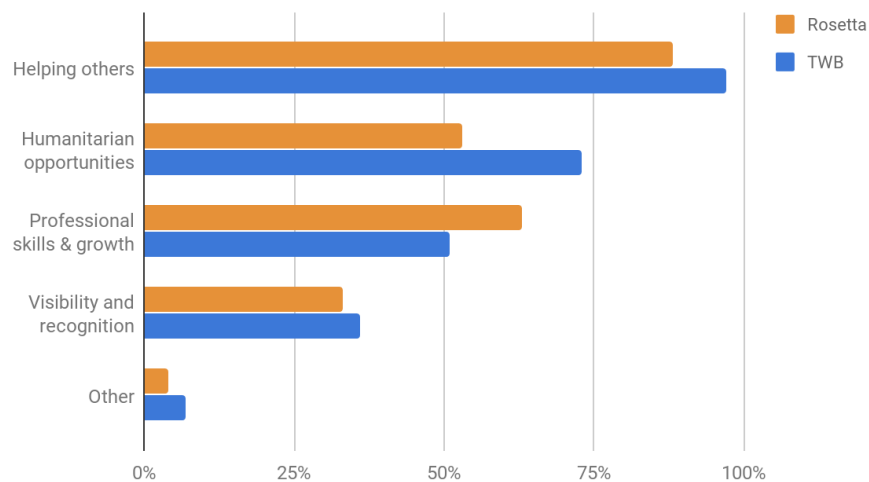


Table 1. Volunteer motivations in Rosetta and TWB

Another issue that the last survey highlights is that of quality. One of the takeaways (as no numbers are shown, unlike the 2013 survey), is: ‘TWB volunteers care DEEPLY about translation quality. Many of the responses from our translators focused on ensuring good translation quality, whether through proofreading, feedback, or consistency checks.’⁶⁰ This concern about quality speaks to the importance of professionalism as part of the narrative of TWB.

Volunteers are willing to contribute. They care about the quality of the work they do, and the support the institution’s narrative of social aid to the Global South and knowingly associate themselves with this mission—the fact that they volunteer is proof of this. Involvement is not completely selfless: work experience is cited as a motivation, albeit not a primary one. Individual accounts of volunteers who have spoken up about their work with TWB also highlight altruism as a motivation. This is the case of volunteer Eric Ragu, who was recognized in the TWB blog in 2016 for having translated 500,000 words: ‘I found out about TWB in an ad on ProZ.com some years ago. At that time, I didn’t have much money but I wanted to get engaged and make a difference. I was fascinated by the idea and variety of topics covered by TWB so I decided to offer my expertise to organizations,

⁶⁰ Ibid.

big and small, that are striving to make this world a better place to live in.’⁶¹ Another account on the TWB blog highlights a team of four volunteers who donated over 1.2 million words, citing altruism as their main motivation: ‘All four translators acknowledge that their work with TWB allows them to contribute to social change and global awareness.’⁶² A personal account on the Andiamo! Language Services blog presents both professional experience and contribution to a good cause as motivations for being a volunteer at TWB: ‘Not only did it make me feel confident about my professionalism, but it also made me feel more complete because I knew I was helping other people.’⁶³⁶⁴ Another volunteer who published an account of his involvement cites describes his work with TWB as ‘a part of my commitment to offer my professional services to organizations that support those in need.’⁶⁵

The accounts regarding volunteer work with TWB echo the motivations found in other similar projects, such as Maeve Olohan’s research regarding the TED volunteer translation initiative, also powered by volunteers. Olohan analysed 11 online blogs from TED translators, concluding that their main motivation was to share knowledge, ideas and information, with enjoyment involved in translating also cited as a primary motivation.⁶⁶ Julie McDonough Dolmaya’s study on the motivations of translators to contribute to Wikipedia also found that both professional and non-professional translators were motivated by the possibility of making information available in other languages to spread knowledge that otherwise would not be available.⁶⁷ These studies help support the notion of altruism as a main motivation for translators to get involved in this type of initiative.

⁶¹ Francesca Debernardis, ‘The TWB volunteer who translated 500k words’, *The Language Matters Blog*, Translators Without Borders, July 13, 2016, <<https://www.translatorswithoutborders.org/blog/the-first-to-translate-500k-words/>>.

⁶² Danielle Moore, ‘A translation worth a million words’, *The Language Matters Blog*, Translators Without Borders, March 28, 2018, <<https://www.translatorswithoutborders.org/blog/translation-million-words/>>

⁶³ Andiamo! Language Services Ltd, Volunteering for Translators without Borders (2013) <<https://www.andiamo.co.uk/blog/volunteering-translators-without-borders>>

⁶⁴ Faculty of Arts, Humanities and Cultures, University of Leeds, *CTS Students Volunteer with Translators without Borders* (04 July 2016) <https://www.leeds.ac.uk/arts/news/article/4581/cts_students_volunteer_with_translators_without_borders> [accessed 20 May 2018].

⁶⁵ Pieter Beens, *Why I volunteer for Translators Without Borders* (March 18, 2016) <<https://theopenmic.co/why-i-volunteer-for-translators-without-borders/>> [accessed 20 May 2018].

⁶⁶ Maeve Olohan, ‘Why do you translate? Motivation to Volunteer and TED Translation’, *Translation Studies*, 7 (2014), 17–33.

⁶⁷ McDonough Dolmaya, Julie, ‘Analyzing the Crowdsourcing Model and Its Impact on Public Perceptions of Translation’, *The Translator*, 18 (2012), pp. 167–91

While online testimonies might be biased and not show the whole picture, they still show a trend towards altruism, and are relevant to understanding the overlap between the story of activism and action presented by TWB, and the accounts of volunteers who actively engage with this narrative.

Can this altruism, then, be merely narrative? Is it possible that underneath this apparent desire to help others there are self-serving motivations that remain unspoken? A deeper assessment of this question goes beyond the scope of this research project, as it would require in-depth research of individual cases. However, the issue can be further illuminated from a different angle. Rather than discussing whether the hearts of the volunteers are in the right place, so to speak, we can better understand the dynamics of this exchange—and the ways it proves beneficial to humankind more broadly—by looking at altruism from a scientific perspective. This can help us gain a deeper understanding of the overall outcome of volunteering that goes beyond analysis of individual cases. In other words, does it matter whether the conscious motivations are altruistic? Does it matter if there is a combination of altruism and personal benefit, as the polls seem to suggest? The fact that the volunteers rank ‘helping’ as a main motivation suggests that they believe that the institution is doing more good than harm. Does this mean that this potential benefit can override some of the ethical concerns mentioned above? In order to better illustrate this balance, it proves useful to analyse altruism and its role in society on broader terms. While this may not lead to a definitive ethical conclusion, it can at the very least help explain the behaviours of volunteers and the consequences of their involvement.

Evolving altruism

In the book *Does Altruism Exist?*,⁶⁸ David Sloan Wilson discusses altruism from an evolutionary biology standpoint. His analysis is based on altruism explored on two fronts, one focusing on action, and one focusing on thoughts and feelings. Wilson introduces the examples of microorganisms on a cellular level, bees and chimpanzees to outline the dynamics of altruistic behaviour at groups with different levels of complexity. He finds that, while altruism as a practice of an individual will lead to a disadvantage within the individual’s social group, it will however contribute to the survival of the group in

⁶⁸ David Sloan Wilson, *Does Altruism Exist?* (Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2015).

relationship to other social groups. In other words, while altruism behaviour can be detrimental to the individual's social status amongst his peers, this practice in turn leads to the success of the group in a broader scale. This analysis strays away from predominant views such as those posited by Richard Dawkins, who famously proposed the idea of the 'selfish gene'—the evolutionary will of genes to perpetuate themselves—in order to explain behaviours that we consider altruistic, with the weight of the actions being on the side of the individual organism rather than on the broader scale of the group.⁶⁹

Wilson then moves to a discussion of altruism in terms of thoughts and feelings—the realm of the psychological motivations behind altruism—as a means to illuminate this behaviour in human beings. As critic William Irwin points out, the conclusions are less clear on this matter: 'Wilson seems to concede that there is no way to disprove psychological egoism because we have no way to read minds and no access to the subconscious motivations of either ourselves or others. However, he believes that what matters most are not the thoughts or feelings motivating people, but the actions they take.' In this sense, Wilson's work serves to highlight the importance of action as a measure of altruism in any species and in several levels of group organization, as well as the inherent difficulty in revealing the true psychological motivations of an altruistic action: 'Selfishness beats altruism within groups. Altruistic groups beat selfish groups. Everything else is commentary.'⁷⁰ This remark, which Wilson offers as a conscious oversimplification of the subject, is meant to highlight the ubiquity of these behaviours across species and societies.

This sidestep into an evolutionary discussion of altruism can help us frame the actions of volunteer translators in a new light. While psychological motivations are not irrelevant, they do not need to be the primary focus either. Altruism exists 'as a criterion that people use for adopting behaviors and policies, with the welfare of whole groups in mind rather than more narrow individual and factional interests. This kind of intentional group selection is as important as natural group selection in the evolution of functionally organized human groups.'⁷¹ Wilson argues that altruism is better addressed as a practice. This train of thought helps us acknowledge that, while the motivation of a volunteer—or of

⁶⁹ William Irwin, 'Does Altruism Exist? by David Sloan Wilson', *Philosophy Now, a magazine of ideas*, .112, (2016), in <https://philosophynow.org/issues/112/Does_Altruism_Exist_by_David_Sloan_Wilson>

⁷⁰ Wilson, 71.

⁷¹ Wilson, 142.

any organization for that matter—might not be perfect in theory, the actions undertaken which align *in practice* with a project that seeks to benefit others can be construed as altruistic and may promote the wellbeing of the group. An evaluation of psychological motivations makes the analysis murky: ‘we shouldn’t care much about distinguishing among motives, any more than we should care about being paid with cash or a check. It’s not right to privilege altruism as a psychological motive when other equivalent motives exist.’⁷²

Fostering hope, enabling action

As we have seen, TWB’s history and status as an NGO raises a series of ethical concerns. These include questions regarding their affiliation with for-profit institutions, their involvement with a narrative of aid to the Global South—implying this region is in need of aid in the first place—, and their affiliation to a type of institution that has historically failed to represent the needs of vulnerable communities. These are further complicated when taking into account the true motivations of volunteers who claim to act on good will, while there might be opportunistic motivations that remain hidden. This chapter has focused on outlining these issues in the hopes of providing tools for a critical evaluation for both volunteers and other NGOs interested in the work of TWB.

Translators without Borders pushes forward an agenda of ‘knowledge that knows no language barriers’. While ethical conflicts do surround their work, the fact that both individuals and institutions continue to be involved with the organization and cite ‘doing good’ as a motivation for participating suggests that this narrative is stronger than the historical ethical conflicts, and that volunteers prioritize this focus on actively aiding others when making a value judgement about the institution.

TWB was built to provide knowledge to vulnerable communities in their own language. What would be the consequence of putting a halt to this goal due to economic and political conflicts of the institutions that they work with? Doing so would perhaps be equal to depriving people of knowledge in their language that would otherwise simply not exist. There is no denying the problematic aspects of TWB’s work. However, the premise of providing knowledge seems difficult to argue against. Most of the work done by TWB is

⁷² Ibid.

conducted by volunteers who freely provide their time and expertise. The fact that their numbers continue to grow, and that the number of words translated by TWB continues to increase, has to serve at least as a partial (if not extremely relevant) indicator of whether these issues are too ethically compromising. People continue to contribute and invest their time and expertise, in the same way that they freely contribute to a myriad of projects and humanitarian initiatives, many of which are flourishing online. As these practices continue to expand, discarding the ethical criteria of the volunteers themselves seems like a dangerous move, and extremely naïve regarding the increasing power of online volunteer communities.

Could this active involvement be explained merely as self-serving behaviour? The analysis from evolutionary biology can help us understand that this question is more complex than a yes or no answer, and that the psychological motivations behind an altruistic action can be hard to pinpoint. However, altruism can ultimately be evaluated through action, and this type of behaviour can ultimately be for the benefit of groups on a scale much larger than that of specific individuals.

Ultimately, the worth of an institution such as TWB can be measured through the effectiveness of its action, and through the actions of all parties involved who continue to support it and allow for its continued growth. It's not about whether there is pure altruism as a core motivation, but whether the work is truly beneficial. Following this line of thought, the following chapter focuses on TWB's practices, specifically their use of technology and crowdsourcing models of content building, to better assess the effectiveness of their work, painting a clearer picture of their pursuit of eliminating knowledge barriers around the world.

Chapter 3: Technology and crowdsourcing at the service of humanitarian aid

As seen in the previous chapter, TWB currently divide their projects into four categories, each designed to address different crisis situations: Crisis Response – Words of Relief is their flagship emergency response project; Development and Preparedness includes long term projects; Capacity Building focuses on providing training to translators and contributors on the field in vulnerable areas; Advocacy focuses on raising awareness about the importance of translation in humanitarian efforts. This chapter focuses primarily on the work done under the umbrella of Development and Preparedness, and on the history and use of Kató, the TWB Online Workspace through which translation and coordination tasks are carried out. These projects help illustrate the ways in which TWB and its partners have implemented new technologies and practices in order to carry out their mission. From this analysis stems a discussion of contemporary crowdsourcing practices in online environments. This leads to a reflection about the blurring lines between professional and non-professional translation, and the concerns that this entails for the profession. Then, we turn to a discussion of the difficulty of setting policies and ethical guidelines for translators, and the impact on quality due to the lack of formal training. Finally, the chapter explores the implications of these practices within the framework of epistemic injustice and the perennial issue of downward accountability in humanitarian work.

TWB's online open-source workspace

In 2011, TWB partnered with ProZ to develop their online workspace, Kató,⁷³ described as a 'crowd-sourced platform connecting the TWB community of qualified volunteer translators directly with non-profit partners.'⁷⁴ The online workspace is equipped with 'computer-assisted translation tools, functionality for storing common words and taxonomies and even bigger incentives for our community.'⁷⁵ The platform can be used to

⁷³ Kató – TWB's translation platform, *Translators Without Borders* (2018)

<<https://translatorswithoutborders.org/our-work/kato-translation-platform/>> [accessed June 5 2018].

⁷⁴ Development & Preparedness, *Translators Without Borders* (2018)

<<https://translatorswithoutborders.org/our-work/development/>> [accessed June 5, 2018].

⁷⁵ Kató – TWB's translation platform.

work in different media, including video subtitles and voice-overs, and aids in the training of students learning underrepresented languages.

Kató serves as a virtual environment in which volunteers can coordinate their work. It allowed TWB to standardize practices, provide an equal set of parameters and resources for every task performed, and the implementation of other useful tools, including 'machine translation, translation memory, and enhanced quality assurance tools.'⁷⁶ Before the creation of Kató, 'TWB worked for years rushing from crisis to crisis, each with a different set of parameters and requirements. This resulted in essentially no time to stop and streamline technological efforts, even with the basic tools that many of us take for granted, such as a shared translation memory.'⁷⁷ As the organization continued to expand, it began to recruit full-time staff members in order to coordinate technical support for its expanding projects, and in order to allow a growing number of volunteers and organizations to get involved. Access to the platform can be gained only by becoming an accepted volunteer or organization.

Once a volunteer has been accepted and gains access to Kató, they have the option to mark themselves as available or unavailable to accept projects. From the home screen, they can select among available translations requested in their language pair(s), each of which presents a description of the subject matter, a deadline, and the NGO which is requesting the translation. Once they've accepted a job, volunteers gain access to the online translation platform based on the Matecat open-source software and translation tool. They can see whether the text has been segmented (to be translated by several volunteers, according to the length of the overall document), which users are also contributing to the translation, which users have signed up for proofreading, and which users are managing the overall process. A discussion thread is also available for each task, where participants can post comments, questions or feedback. The TWB workspace also lets volunteers keep track of past projects, shows statistics for number of words translated and tasks completed, a list of active projects and their due dates, a list of non-profits which are currently active or which have been served by TWB in the past, and a feed that shows

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Jost Zetzsche, 'Translators without Borders and Technology', *The ATA Chronicle*, XLVI.4, (July/August 2017).

comments made by the translators who have finished a translation. After marking a task as complete, translators are automatically prompted to add one of these comments and ‘share their achievement’ with the community.⁷⁸

The TWB online workspace is designed to encourage collaboration among peers, to help volunteers keep track of their work, to enable the use of past projects to simplify current ones (especially via translation memories and glossaries which are automatically available), and to facilitate the translation experience overall. It is a digital environment that fosters crowdsourced contributions to the work of NGOs partnered with TWB, tapping into the potential of a remote workforce and eliminating physical barriers—anyone from any place in the world can contribute, granted they have an internet connection. The link between crowdsourcing and translation, however, is not new. Other accounts which discuss this relationship can help present a more complete picture how it applies to the work done by TWB.

Crowdsourcing humanitarian aid

The term ‘crowdsourcing’ was coined in 2006 by Jeff Howe, who introduced it in an article for Wired Magazine. It refers to ‘the act of taking a job traditionally performed by an employee and outsourcing it to an undefined, generally large group of people in the form of an open call.’⁷⁹ However, this work model precedes the term with which it is described, even in the field of translation. This is evident in the examples discussed in Chapter 1, particularly Maeve Olohan’s analysis of the translation of a scientific journal from the 19th century, where contributors collaborated to put together issues of the journal,⁸⁰ and Else Vieira’s project, which can also be read as a form of collaboration in order to support a political cause. In their analysis of the uncharted territory of non-professional translation and interpreting, Pérez-González and Susam-Saraeva describe the efforts of communities

⁷⁸ This description of the workspace comes from direct observation by the author, who has been a volunteer for TWB since January 2018.

⁷⁹ Ria Mae Borromeo and Motomichi Toyama, ‘An investigation of unpaid crowdsourcing’, *Human-centric Computing and Information Sciences*, 6.11, (2016), 1.

⁸⁰ Maeve Olohan, ‘Volunteer Translation and Altruism in the Context of a Nineteenth-Century Scientific Journal,’ *The Translator*, 18:2 (2012), pp. 193-215

of anime fans in the US in the 1960s.⁸¹ This practice, they argue, is yet another example of a crowdsourced and volunteering model through which Japanese cultural products were allowed to cross to the US market, illustrating the influence of crowdsourcing in the global distribution of culture.⁸² Their text also acknowledges the ambivalent perceptions of crowdsourcing, thought of at times as a form of ‘aggravated corporate exploitation’ and as a form of ‘new humanism’ at others.⁸³

The ways in which TWB implements crowdsourcing and open-source technology seem to be consistent with their mission, as well as with the collaborative nature of translation, a quality which is being boosted by new technological advances. However, this relationship also entails a variety of interwoven issues, including: the tense relationship between professional and non-professional translators; issues of quality assurance and policy implementation in order to regulate translation practices and provide guidelines for translators; economic issues, or the disparity between the value attributed to technology vs the value attributed to translation; issues of linguistic and epistemic injustice. The existing literature points to a great overlap between these issues, which are discussed below in an attempt to establish their relevance in relation to TWB’s work.

Blurring the boundaries of professionalism

As discussed in Chapter 1, Maeve Olohan’s analysis of translation as a professional activity pointed to the difficulty of clearly defining how translation contributes to the national economies of the UK, the USA, France and Germany, and to the fact that most of the work that is registered is carried out predominantly by freelancers. The text highlights the difficulty of elucidating the difference between ‘documented experience in translating’ and ‘documented professional experience in translating.’⁸⁴ This difficulty is manifested in TWB as well. Although potential volunteers are required to offer proof of their ability, either through experience or formal education in translation or a relevant field, professional training in translation is not a strict requirement.⁸⁵ Can an online environment which

⁸¹ Luis Pérez-González and Sebnem Susam-Saraeva, ‘Non-Professionals Translating and Interpreting’, *The Translator*, 18 (2012), pp. 155.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Maeve Olohan, ‘Economic Trends and Developments in the Translation Industry’, *The Interpreter and Translator Trainer*, 1 (2007).

⁸⁵ The author was able to successfully apply without formal qualifications in translation.

fosters participation regardless of certified professional status be further blurring this line? This issue is also present in TWB's alliances with other organizations, specifically their partnership with the Wikimedia Foundation for the *Wiki 100x100 project*. This effort, which aims to translate Wikipedia's 100 most relevant medical articles into 100 different languages, can provide a broader view on the new trends in collecting, storing, and divulging knowledge through collaborative platforms.

Wikipedia, founded in 2001, has grown to become the flagship for the new era of digital content creation through horizontal collaboration, a project that strives to 'create and distribute a free encyclopedia of the highest possible quality to every single person on the planet in their own language.'⁸⁶ Crowdsourcing is key, enabling collaborative efforts where both professionals and non-professionals contribute to the growth and quality control of the articles. Since *Wiki 100x100* was launched in 2012, 1,900 medical articles have been translated into 83 languages, with an estimated annual readership of 39 million users.⁸⁷ Both institutions share a vision of making knowledge available to everyone without restrictions, and both effectively contribute to blurring the distinction between professional and non-professional contributor.

The increasing difficulty of distinguishing professionals and non-professionals is only furthered by the abundance of new educational tools online, including simple video tutorials posted by individuals who share their skills and know-how, dedicated YouTube Channels that teach about specific topics, TED talks aimed at divulging 'great ideas' by experts from around the world, or the creation of online educational platforms and Massive Online Open Courses, or MOOCs, where participants can access contents and engage with teachers and colleagues via the web. Autodidacticism, crowdsourcing practices, open-source software, all point to profound shifts in the way we share knowledge and complete tasks. TWB demonstrates that these trends are also affecting the way in which we do humanitarian work. This changing panorama has specificities that go beyond the scope of this work, but which can help support the claim that TWB is not necessarily innovating with its use of technology and work model, but rather riding a wave of ongoing

⁸⁶ 'Wikipedia is an encyclopedia,' *Wikimedia*, March 8, 2005 [accessed 5 March 2017].

⁸⁷ *3.3 million people accessing vital medical information every month* (2018) <<https://translatorswithoutborders.org/3-3-million-people-accessed-vital-medical-information-last-month/>> [accessed 9 January 2018].

transformation in work models and content creation. The full impact of these changes in fundamental structures such as education or in professional fields beyond translation is still to be seen.

As Wine Tesseur points out in her analysis of translation practices in Amnesty International, translation theory has highlighted concerns ‘that the phenomenon of volunteer translation will increase organisations’ and companies’ perceptions of translation as a non-professional activity, i.e. that it will reinforce the assumption that translation does not require formal training but can be done by anyone who has sufficient knowledge of two languages.’⁸⁸ In this regard, TWB can be said to be playing a contradictory role. While professionalism is emphasized in application forms and promotional material in their website, this distinction ceases to be important to contributors who successfully jump over this initial hurdle. This means that there is no real guarantee that volunteers will be professional translators. However, TWB is not alone, as new online environments are contributing to blurring these lines across professions. An analysis of the economic implications of this shift may prove useful and provide further information about the needs, expectations, and contributions of users who choose to collaborate in these environments.

The economic value of translation vs technology

There is a fear from the translation industry that crowdsourcing initiatives in the form of volunteering and activism will perpetuate the idea that translation services ought to be for free. Both Olohan’s criticism of lack of fiscal representation of translation as discussed in Chapter 1, and Tesseur’s discussion of Amnesty International, serve as proof.⁸⁹ This issue is part of a historical struggle by translators to make their work visible and valued. As pointed out by Pérez-González and Susam-Saraeva, ‘it is non-professional translators and interpreters, i.e. individuals not only without formal training in linguistic mediation but also working for free, who have always represented the biggest threat to labour market structures, as well as to the identity and livelihood of translation professional.’⁹⁰

⁸⁸ Wine Tesseur, 'The translation challenges of international NGOs: professional and non-professional translation at Amnesty International', *Translation Spaces*, 6.2, (2017), 209-229, pp 4.

⁸⁹ Ibid, 4.

⁹⁰ Pérez-González and Susam-Saraeva, 151.

This is a valid concern, but the translators themselves recognize the nuances, particularly the fact that there is no straightforward answer or solution, especially in the fast-evolving landscape of technology and crowdsourcing. This is evident in J.M. Dolmaya's analysis of the ethics of crowdsourcing, where translators claimed that they would be willing to contribute to non-profit projects but not to for-profit ones.⁹¹ Translators are comfortable to varying degrees about their involvement in for-profit initiatives as volunteers. What is the stance of companies who use this approach? On this matter, Dolmaya presents the case of LinkedIn's translation survey deployed in 2009, which intended to evaluate whether members of its community would be willing to collaborate in translating the site to other languages. When confronted on the issue of undermining the worth of translation, they argued 'that it was simply exploring various translation options, that novice translators would likely be interested in volunteering to help build their reputations, that crowdsourcing would not, in fact, generate savings for LinkedIn given the cost to develop a translation interface system.'⁹²

This line of argumentation has interesting implications, especially when going back to an issue mentioned in Chapter 2: since 2017, TWB charges NGOs a fee for maintaining the platform and supporting the staff members who have been brought on board to enable the site. As crowdsourcing grows as a model that can be applied to a number of initiatives (for profit, not-for-profit, cause-oriented, Wikipedia, TED, Coursera, etc), it is striking that a translation-based initiative emphasises the technology rather than the people doing the work. The fact that there is money exchanged in order to provide technical support is significant regarding our prevalent attitude towards translation even in environments which are supposed to level the field. Arguably, the work of the translators could not be done without a functioning platform, but this argument ignores the fact that the translations were being done before TWB expanded to the US and became partners with ProZ. With the increase in technologies developed to bypass or minimize human involvement (such as Google Translate), it does not seem that online environments are contributing to ameliorate this situation.

⁹¹ Joanna Drugan, 'Translation ethics wikified: How far do professional codes of ethics and practice apply to non-professionally produced translation?', *Linguistica Antverpiensia, New Series – Themes in Translation Studies*, 0.10, p 112.

⁹² *Ibid*, 97.

The emphasis on technological investment has one more contradictory aspect, namely that Kató is based on the Matecat translation software, chosen because 'a) it was open-source and, therefore, customizable without having to rely on the technology vendor; b) it was easy to use without the need for specialized training; and c) it could be used by virtually anyone, professional translator or not.'⁹³ This means they are making use of open-source software and unpaid volunteer work to conduct the bulk of the work. However, as discussed in the previous chapter, all NGOs who become involved with them are charged a fee for the maintenance of the platform.

This shows that both for profit and non-profit institutions readily identify the value of technology and technical support staff, a value that equals money. The translator's work, however central to the endeavour, does not have the same recognition. TWB's focus on supporting the structures rather than the people conducting the work can perhaps indicate how professionalization in translation is evolving, and it is, at the very least, an issue that translators ought to take into consideration when deciding to provide their services for free.

Regardless of the professional status of the volunteers, any translation project requires guidelines that ensure coherence and quality. How, then, are crowdsourcing practices affecting ethical guidelines and best practices in volunteer translation?

Ethical guidelines and best practices

In her text 'Translation ethics wikified,' Joanna Drugan tackles the question of how, if at all, professional codes of ethics can be applied in new translation contexts, especially in the context of crowdsourced projects. Drugan recognizes the importance of codes of ethics and conduct in supporting professionals when facing ethical issues in their practices, providing them with tools to formulate 'appropriate and justifiable responses.'⁹⁴ Drugan also points to the fact that 'translation followed the classic pattern of the development of a profession leading on to its public codification.'⁹⁵ Drugan's text about ethics and social responsibility in translation also raises the issue of the preparation translators receive to

⁹³ Zetzsche, 27.

⁹⁴ Joanna Drugan, 112.

⁹⁵ Ibid, 111.

deal with ethical issues inherent to the profession.⁹⁶ Both works emphasizes the need for translators to be prepared to critically evaluate their own roles as mediators between different parties with different agendas. For Drugan, ‘the lack of attention paid to social responsibility in relation to interpretation and translation’ points to a lack of analysis of social responsibility in academia, and to the need of raising ethical considerations regarding the practice of translation and their effects on broader social issues. This points to the importance of ethical codes developing in parallel to the development of new practices embedded in new technologies, especially in a context of fast paced environments where there are no clear rules.

In her 2017 article, J.M. Dolmaya discusses the possibility and difficulties of developing translation policies that enable a fair flow of information to and from different languages in an attempt to defend linguistic justice, specifically by discussing the case of Wikipedia. As her analysis of both Wikipedia’s practices and of the concept of social justice progresses, Dolmaya asks an intriguing question, namely ‘whether translation [sic] a necessary or even desirable means for making knowledge accessible to as many people as possible. After all, the information in Wikipedia can be made available in multiple languages through independent editing just as easily as it can be made available through translation.’⁹⁷ This question opens a discussion about the value of translation in representing the interests and cultural views of minority or underrepresented languages, and the danger of over-representation of languages such as English, Spanish or German, and their respective cultural backgrounds.

TWB’s project *Solutions for Underserved Languages* seeks to build ‘text and speech data that make it easier to automate underserved languages. [...] Over the next decade, our goal is to bring 20 underserved languages online, creating a useful, sustainable and free asset to empower people through greater access to critical information.’⁹⁸ This project demonstrates an awareness of the issue discussed by Dolmaya, and proposes a way to address it. Interestingly, this project emphasizes automatization as a means to strengthen

⁹⁶ Drugan, Joanna, ‘Ethics and Social Responsibility in Practice: Interpreters and Translators Engaging with and beyond the Professions’, *The Translator*, DOI (published online: 17 Feb 2017)

⁹⁷ Julie McDonough Dolmaya, ‘Expanding the sum of all human knowledge: Wikipedia, translation and linguistic justice’, *The Translator*, 23.2, (2017), 9.

⁹⁸ Gamayun, The Language Equality Initiative Offers Solutions for Underserved Languages, *Translators Without Borders* (2018) < <https://translatorswithoutborders.org/gamayun/> > [accessed 5 June 2018].

what they identify as ‘underserved languages,’ rather than pushing forward strategies of content creation in the languages themselves. While this is only one of the many strategies implemented by TWB, it also reveals that the focus towards the future, and the area that seems to be worthy of investment, is that of technology that facilitates communication without the need for translators or interpreters.

Issues of quality

From here, another line of inquiry emerges, regarding the ways in which the organizations relying on volunteer crowdsourced work can regulate quality and set standards for their workforce. To illustrate, staff members of Amnesty International commented on the difficulty of providing instructions and guidelines while at the same time showing gratefulness to the volunteers, letting them know their work is appreciated and valuable: ‘Staff as well as in-house volunteers at AIVL emphasised that the contribution of volunteer translators was ‘worth gold’, was ‘indispensable’, and that any initiative needed to ‘show them we care’, that ‘we are grateful for their work.’ However, ‘[p]roviding clear and extensive instructions to volunteers was considered as problematic.’⁹⁹

The loss of a hierarchical relationship between those coordinating the work and those doing it can make it difficult to assure quality standards, especially in environments in which there is little or no interaction between participant. However, as shown in the poles in Chapter 2, quality is one of the main concerns of the volunteers. This points to a phenomenon similar to what occurs in Wikipedia and other crowdsourced projects, where quality is the result of standards enforced by the members of the community doing the work rather than the result of external pressures. In the specific case of TWB, there is at the very least a demonstrated concern about the impact of quality.

Volunteering and crowdsourcing allow for a limited amount of regulation on the side of the organizations enabling the work—a part of enabling horizontal relationships is that the workers exercise their power to decide about what they get involved in, what they translate, what languages they work with, and how careful they are regarding the quality of their work and the depth of their involvement.

⁹⁹ Tesseur, 15.

The lack of rigid guidelines and work directives can also mean that organization's goals do not necessarily correspond to those of the volunteers. Dolmaya points to the possibility of crowdsourced initiatives to 'break down limitations on language availability [...] but in some initiatives, they allow an organization to demonstrate its willingness to make a language version available, while making the community responsible for actually completing the translation.'¹⁰⁰ This means that regardless of the intentions set by the organisation, it is ultimately the volunteers who choose whether or not they will contribute to a particular project. In Dolmaya's analysis, this can sometimes result in the project being abandoned for lack of volunteers willing or able to translate a particular text.

While this points to difficulties in regulating codes of conduct and guidelines in online environments, it leads to another question, that of linguistic justice and the difficulties of achieving it.

Linguistic and epistemic injustice

The opening line for describing TWB's *Simple Words for Health project* reads: 'There is no word for "rape" in Swahili. This stark example illustrates how challenging it can be to help victims around the world without access to accurate, culturally sensitive translations of health and medical terminology.'¹⁰¹ The goal of this project is to simplify medical content in English Wikipedia pages, so that it can then be translated to other languages and be readily available in emergencies. As a first step towards this goal, TWB compiled a database of 12,000 essential medical terms which 'have been simplified and translated into more than 40 world languages by qualified doctors and trained medical translators.'¹⁰²

This rather shocking description of the project highlights TWB's focus on making the content available not only through linguistic diversity, but also by keeping the language of its target audience in mind. As seen above, the fact that the option exists of translating the articles to underrepresented languages does not mean that it will occur, but it is at least a step towards levelling the ground for minority languages and, therefore, their

¹⁰⁰ Dolmaya, 2011, 106.

¹⁰¹ Development & Preparedness, Translators Without Borders.

¹⁰² *Translators without Borders announces Simple Words for Health* (June 16, 2014)

<<https://translatorswithoutborders.org/translators-without-borders-announces-simple-words-for-health/>> [accessed 9 January 2018].

speakers. This also points to the importance of an awareness of cultural and linguistic differences that go beyond translation per se, and which can affect the reach and impact of humanitarian aid.

This brings us back the question of ‘whether translation [is] a necessary or even desirable means for making knowledge accessible to as many people as possible,’¹⁰³ as opposed to efforts made to create the content in other languages directly. It also echoes issues brought about by the vertical relationship between those who provide aid and those who receive it, as discussed in Chapter 2. In this regard, there is a remarkable absence of voices of those supposedly served by the platform—no testimonies of people living in vulnerable communities, or in areas which have suffered natural disasters, are presented on the TWB site. In general, information about the projects’ reach and effectiveness seems lacking for an organization that has been running for a decade.

The extended discussion regarding the uses of technology, combined with this absence of a voice on the side of the people on the receiving end of TWBs efforts, point to the need for a discussion of the significance of the knowledge being produced and shared through their work and crowdsourcing models.

Gloria Origgi and Serena Ciranna raise these issues in their analysis of epistemic Injustice in digital environments. This text expands the concept of Epistemic Injustice, fleshed out by Miranda Fricker in 2007 to discuss forms of discrimination based on an individual’s capacity as a knower.¹⁰⁴ Origgi and Ciranna conclude, through their analysis of this phenomenon in the internet, that technology is hindering our capacity of knowing ourselves as reliable sources of information, prompting us to hesitate and rely on technology—google, social media and apps which map our behaviours, preferences, and interactions with others—as a way of obtaining self-knowledge, making us ‘less credible witnesses of our own lives.’¹⁰⁵

¹⁰³ Dolmaya, 9.

¹⁰⁴ Miranda Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

¹⁰⁵ Gloria Origgi and Serena Ciranna, 'Epistemic Injustice, the case of digital environments', in *The Routledge Handbook of Epistemic Injustice*, ed. by Ian James Kidd, José Medina, and Gaile Pohlhaus, Jr. (London: Routledge, 2017).

These reflections on epistemic injustice in digital environments can lead to two questions. The first one has to do with how volunteers are building a narrative of themselves as agents of social change by subscribing to the narratives of humanitarian aid proposed by TWB. This is reinforced by the prompts to share their completed projects whenever they participate in a translation on Kató. The trend towards positive feedback can also be seen in the absence of negative accounts both in TWB's site and elsewhere. This reinforces the idea that external prompts from digital environments are contributing to building an uncritically positive identity for the volunteers, creating a narrative dependency. This dependency enables volunteers to build a digital narrative of themselves as responsible citizens, as professionals, as ethical agents. How do we go beyond this identity to ensure that volunteer action is leading to concrete benefits? And how do we ensure that volunteers are engaging critically with the underlying ethos rather than simply adopting it without question?

The second issue that stems from this discussion is that of ensuring the ethos of the organization is not harming the possibility of self-knowledge and action of people from affected communities, who are on the receiving end of a wealth of knowledge that comes from languages and scientific and cultural contexts foreign to theirs. Striking a balance between the need to support their communities and not undermining their epistemological authority over their own lives seems like a complex problem, to say the least. It is also tied to the historical position of NGOs as discussed earlier.

Again, as there is no feedback on the side of the communities receiving the aid, it is hard to assess the extent to which this is true, or to which it is a concern that in some manner invalidates the work done by TWB or any organization seeking to provide knowledge. A just assessment of the work of TWB cannot be carried out without including reactions from the people who are benefiting from the platform's and volunteer's efforts. All testimonials on their website, for instance, are comments from collaborators and allied companies. Not a word is mentioned of what the recipients of the aid have to say. This might be understandable when dealing with crisis response initiatives, or when the translations are for materials coming from other NGOs, but not on TWB's own long-term projects. TWB's latest annual report cites that about 100,000 people were reached with translated materials in the European refugee crisis. Similar figures are offered elsewhere to

discuss the organization's impact, usually focused on number of words translated, or volunteers involved.

In parallel to the question of whether we should rather strive for the creation of content in less represented languages as opposed to translating them from other languages, should humanitarian efforts not emphasize empowering the communities to create solutions that come from them and apply to them specifically? TWB's *Capacity Building* arm is geared towards this purpose in a way, as it strives to provide training for translators in local languages around the world, with an emphasis in Kenya and Guinea.¹⁰⁶ The Kenya efforts have served to provide basic translation training to over 250 people, and the Guinea branch has translated over 800,000 words of healthcare content.¹⁰⁷ These projects seem to at least acknowledge the need of enabling the communities beyond providing information from external sources, although the long term-impact is hard to assess from the outside.

Can technology help us improve downward accountability?

As Nicolas de Torrente points out when discussing his analysis of Doctors Without Borders, 'Humanitarian aid's 'externality' and the large power asymmetry between providers and recipients set limits to what can be achieved' through humanitarian aid.¹⁰⁸ This, he recognizes, is one of the perennial issues in this field, a lack of downward accountability that results from a lack of emphasis placed on the recipients of the aid. However, new technologies are enabling new forms of contribution, and putting 'horizontality' back on the table as a viable model of conducting large-scale projects and carrying out relevant humanitarian work.

These new working environments can help an organization such as TWB to tap into a willing workforce that would otherwise be unable to contribute. However, they also carry their own issues. Translation theorists and practitioners seem sensitive to the ethical issues raised by volunteering and by initiatives which blur the distinction between professionals

¹⁰⁶ Capacity Building, *Translators Without Borders* (2018) <<https://translatorswithoutborders.org/our-work/capacity-building/>> [accessed 9 January 2018].

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Nicolas de Torrenté, 'The Relevance and Effectiveness of Humanitarian Aid: Reflections about the Relationship between Providers and Recipient', *Social Research*, 80.2, (2013), 607-634.

vs. non-professionals and for-profit vs. not-for-profit, with consequences in terms of payment and public perception of translation as a professional practice. As we saw in the previous chapter, the volunteer translator is highly concerned with the quality of the work as well. This seems to merit some optimism regarding what can be achieved through the efforts of this disseminated workforce.

It is also vital to recognize that this technological landscape is allowing more players onto the field. While many might be non-professionals, they can also bring innovation to the table, precisely because they are less restricted by professional norms and strict practices. As this phenomenon is being manifested across disciplines and platforms, it is important to generate criticism on this issue while also allowing for innovation in practice—or, rather, understanding that this innovation is coming whether there are theoretical considerations about it or not. Regulating work on virtual environments, through crowdsourced volunteer labour, while defending the rights of people to have access to information in their language and to contribute according to their own possibilities and expertise, is a hard balance to strike.

The chapter has emphasized the dynamics and problems that arise from digital, crowdsourced environments and practices. Since these spaces are becoming more predominant and enabling new forms of online communication and collaboration, they could also potentially serve to tackle this issue of lack of representation and downward accountability.

Conclusion

This dissertation presented the work of Translators without Borders as a means to explore contemporary volunteer translation practices. It discussed the narratives that serve as the basis for TWB's work, the ways in which the organisation reflects contemporary trends in volunteer translation as a tool for humanitarian aid, and the ways in which it makes use of new technologies and crowdsourcing practices to carry out its mission. The conclusion consists of a summary of the findings on these three areas. It then moves on to recommendations that can be extracted from the research, and discusses ways in which further research on these projects could be improved.

Summary of findings

Translation has a role to play in humanitarian aid, in activism, and in shaping the new technological landscape. This potential for action can be seen in its history and in its stories. The accounts presented by Lin Kenan, Elsa Vieira, and Maeve Olohan in Chapter 1 serve not only to illustrate this potential of translation, but also different ways in which these narratives can be presented and serve as the basis for the analysis of contemporary projects which have similar intentions.

Storytelling, weaving narratives, can be an effective and engaging way to capture and communicate the complexity of our current technological and social landscape, of bringing together the ethical, economic, and technological concerns that are involved in contemporary humanitarian causes and translation practices. This enables us to critically assess the complexity of these issues in an attempt to express them and define guidelines and best practices.

TWB's continued growth over the years, and the continually increasing numbers of volunteers can, at least partially, help to assess the effectiveness of the organisation and evaluate its ethical standing. Understanding the role that TWB plays as part of a broader historical context can shed light on the challenges that this involves. Feedback from volunteers choosing to participate can provide a better sense of the significance of the institution's narratives and action. Because no tangible rewards are offered to the translators, explaining the willingness of volunteers to contribute can only be done by evaluating intangible rewards, including professional experience, but, more importantly,

the opportunity to participate in a narrative of transformation and contribution to the improvement of conditions of vulnerable communities around the world. While denying that there is a 'feel-good' aspect to the narrative, this does not devalue the fact that the story helps secure support from people interested in actively contributing.

The work of any NGO is conducted within a complex historical and economic background. This is especially relevant for an NGO that acts as a facilitator of the work of other institutions, as seen in Chapter 2. Awareness of this background can serve both to illuminate ethical concerns and to understand the power relations at play between those providing the aid and the recipients. As TWB's work is based on volunteer contributions, this also brings questions about the motivations of the volunteers, and questions about their awareness of the effects of their participation.

Contributions from post-colonial theory about humanitarian aid and the role of NGOs are necessary to discuss these issues and provide a critical framework to evaluate the involvement both of volunteers and other NGOs. Volunteer participation can be seen as a vote of confidence. They vote to support a cause, to actively engage in a narrative of social aid. Reading the willing participation of volunteers in this light can help us assess whether the potential conflicts of interest in TWB outweigh the potential benefits to the people they wish to serve. TWB's consistent growth in terms of number of volunteers, of affiliated NGOs, and of words translated can be seen as a positive form of feedback on the side of the contributors and reveals not only of the effectiveness of its narrative of eliminating knowledge barriers but also the sustainability of its work model.

Contributions from evolutionary biology on the issue of altruism can inform us about the reasons why people donate their time and expertise to TWB. While it may seem like an unusual tangent in a dissertation in the humanities, it can help clarify the role of altruism and collaboration in societies on a broader scale. From microscopic organisms to other primates, altruism serves to strengthen the status of a social group as a whole, even though this might involve loss at the individual level. This knowledge can not only illuminate the phenomenon of volunteer translation, but also serve to orient future volunteering initiatives and gain new perspectives regarding the effects of humanitarian aid in emergency situations.

New online initiatives that rely on volunteer translators continue to appear. However, this technological shift is not restricted to this field alone. It is part of a wider phenomenon of people volunteering time and expertise and sharing knowledge and skills online through new formats. From online forums where virtually anything can be asked, to platforms for comparing notes on mathematical problems, to dedicated YouTube channels that teach about history, sciences, and philosophy, there is a shift towards free content creation and crowdsourcing. As we have seen, whether this is done for pure altruistic motives is hard to determine. Things get murky when we try to evaluate psychological motivations on an individual level. However, the fact is that this very shift towards community content creation has given us valuable resources such as Wikipedia and Massive Online Open Courses, and is now contributing to populate the internet with online lectures and discussions by leading academics in their fields. TWB is part of a broader movement towards harnessing the potential of a workforce that now has the chance to participate regardless of physical barriers.

Quality control is a fundamental concern when evaluating crowdsourced content creation or translation. As demonstrated above, volunteers involved with TWB are greatly concerned with the quality of the resources provided to communities in need of support. This is especially encouraging given that one of the great challenges of organisations relying on volunteer work is setting guidelines and standards for the volunteers—as exemplified by the translation work carried out by Amnesty International. This shows a potential for self-regulated quality control in crowdsourced content creation.

The difficulty of regulating the work of volunteers is paired with the difficulty of setting translation policies that keep up with technological advances and new practices. This is also a consequence of the increasing number of non-professionals who contribute as volunteers, blurring the line between translators with a formal education and non-professional freelancers or experts in other fields who believe their knowledge is sufficient to translate. Again, this phenomenon is not restricted to translation, where the issue of professionalization and recognition has been widely discussed—it is part of a broader change involving new forms of informal online content creation and sharing. TWB's model is contributing to blurring this line. It's efforts in capacity building demonstrate an awareness of this problem and of the importance of providing training and tools to

volunteers in the field and to generate forms of contribution that go beyond emergency aid.

The trend towards crowdsourcing and online workspaces shows us that, at this stage at least, technology is more highly valued in TWB than the efforts of the volunteers who shoulder the bulk of the work conducted by the organization. This is not to say that the worth of the volunteer's work is disregarded, but it is demonstrated specifically by their recent practice of charging a fee to partner NGOs to maintain the online workspace. This also attests to the fact that, while TWB's primary role is overcoming knowledge barriers by translating content, they deem the technological infrastructure to be more essential to their mission.

The growing presence of technology presents challenges as well as new opportunities for collaboration. The issue of epistemic injustice in digital environments points to growing concerns regarding our capacity of self-knowledge as we begin to rely more and more on social media, search engines and other online resources to attain knowledge about ourselves and the world. This parallels the dependence of TWB on technology in spite of the fact that, as an organisation aiming to eliminate knowledge barriers, it is primarily geared towards fighting epistemic injustice. Again, this is an issue that goes beyond the scope of a single NGO, but it merits consideration, especially as TWB works primarily in digital environments and provides translated contents through projects such as Wikipedia and other online means of distribution.

Finally, while crowdsourcing has the capacity for creating horizontal workspaces and levelling the field for all participants, the TWB site shows a glaring lack of feedback on the side of the communities they are trying to serve. No testimonials are given on the side of the recipients of the aid—their accountability is restricted to facts and figures about emergency situations in which they have participated, and on testimonies of volunteers about the benefits of the organisation's work.

Recommendations

Interdisciplinary is essential, not only across the humanities and social sciences, but also across broader disciplines: biology, computer sciences, economics. This can enrich our perspective on contemporary issues and help orient informed policies and practices that

acknowledge that both the problems and the solutions are inserted in wide-ranging webs of significance. Contributions to knowledge that keep this in mind can help expand the horizons of academic research in the humanities and social sciences and help keep these fields relevant.

This dissertation emphasises interdisciplinarity. Given its limited length, this means that it sacrifices depth for scope. It attempts to map out a variety of issues involved in the work of a single institution. Future efforts along this line would benefit from the inclusion of more case studies, enabling richer comparisons about specific issues that arise from their analysis.

Another limitation in this work is that it relies on information available online—which also means that there is more information on the good the organisation does than on potential criticism that could come from either the volunteers or the organisation itself. Further research on this subject would greatly benefit from direct dialogue with the volunteers beyond testimonials posted on blogs or TWB's site, as this could reveal more nuanced motivations and possibly areas of conflict or specific problems to be tackled. An open discussion with the organisation itself could provide further insights into the challenges TWB has faced as it continues to expand, its capacity for self-criticism, and its future goals.

Humanitarian aid is evolving. We cannot be naïve about the ethical concerns, the underlying histories, the conflicts of interest inherent to institution such as TWB, which benefits from volunteer work and maintains a narrative of providing aid to those in need—a vertical relationship with the helpers at the top and the recipients at the bottom. As technology helps level the playfield, we must strive to create new models that incorporate the voices of all parties involved.

Our current technological landscape demands responsibility. Crowdsourcing is but a single branch of a variety of changes that are already upon us. People are already connecting, sharing, building in innovative ways. Reflecting on these issues is indispensable in order to outline policies and help orient these changes. Our policies, laws, education systems seem unable to keep up. There are overlapping concerns across the literature in translation studies as well as across disciplines. Things are changing faster than we can

explain or understand, predict, and regulate. Practitioners of translation, digital activists, and contributors to crowdsourcing initiatives must keep this in mind when choosing and acting. Institutions must acknowledge the challenges. Things will not be perfect as they move forwards. Pondering the impact of crowdsourcing and volunteering from multiple disciplines can enable constructive discussions.

Individuals are connecting, working and contributing to causes in creative ways. We can strive to orient this phenomenon, the new technologies enabling this shift, and the will of collaborators around the world in equally creative ways. We must continue to open spaces through which we can tap into this potential. Technology plays a key role in this shift. We are responsible for better understanding the ways in which it can enable, as well as jeopardize, progress. Part of this is weaving comprehensive narratives that illustrate these shifts, so that we may encourage hope and informed action.

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